

Homeless but not Hopeless: Jewish-Hungarians' Migration to the United States, 1919–1945

Frank, Tibor. *Double Exile. Migrations of Jewish-Hungarian Professionals through Germany to the United States, 1919–1945*. Oxford: Peter Lang, 2009.

Zoltán Peterecz

Tibor Frank's latest book adds another chapter to the ever-growing volume of Hungarian-American relations, of which the author is a regular provider. In this work, which is the result of twenty years of research, Frank reveals a curious trend in Hungarian history in the interwar years. He identifies and traces the mass exodus of many Hungarian intellectuals of Jewish origin. These people, most of them scientists, led by instinct, worsening conditions starting right after World War I, and later by legal enforcement, found a route to possible existence and freedom, both in the political and scientific senses. This route led from Budapest to Germany as the initial step, first of all to Berlin, and then to the big cities of the United States. Both these people's origin and path give the bases for the title of the book, *Double Exile*. It is not the first book touching upon this subject. Some of the scientists also appear in other books. For example, György Marx's *The Voice of the Martians* (Budapest: Loránd Eötvös Physical Society, 1994)¹, dealt with twenty the prominent Hungarians, many of whom were scientists Marx knew personally. Kati Marton's recent book, *The Great Escape: Nine Jews Who Fled Hitler and Changed the World* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2007) also deals with Leo Szilárd, Edward Teller, Eugene Wigner, and John von Neumann, from a somewhat different angle and perspective. While Marton's book is following the journalistic genre of writing, Frank's book is that of a

¹ The book was published in Hungarian as *A marslakók érkezése* [The Arrival of the Martians] (Budapest: Akadémiai Kiadó, 2000).

historian and delves most deeply into the combined relations of politics, culture, education, social and immigration studies.

In Hungary, by the early years of the twentieth century, the level of education started to achieve a high standard. On the highest level of education, the proportion of Jewish students was way over their ethnic ratio compared to the whole of Hungary. Despite earlier trends of assimilation, the Jews were often seen as different and un-Hungarian. In the wake of the Trianon Treaty in 1920, in which Hungary was rendered a small country shorn of crucial territories and population, many well-educated people found no possibility for work. Also, as a backlash to the 1919 Hungarian Soviet Republic, in which many participants were Jews, the anti-Semitic sentiment was manifest in the infamous *Numerus Clausus* Act, which regulated the percentage of Jewish students that were allowed into the highest educational facilities. But as Frank notes, it was not only the political events that evoked such sentiment, since the “Jewish question [was] deeply embedded in early twentieth-century Hungarian society.” (97) In any case, the ruling legal and common environment made many Jewish intellectuals decide in favor of leaving Hungary, simply because “there was no choice left to them but emigration.” (103) Among such scientists who later became world famous were Theodore von Kármán, John von Neumann, Leo Szilard, Eugene Wigner, and Edward Teller. Although they all started their studies in Hungary and came from the upper middle class, in order to fulfill their scientific hunger and eschew repression at home, they needed to leave their home country.

As the book explores, Germany, and first and foremost Berlin, was a logical first destination for all these people. First of all, a very strong tie had been in existence between the German/Austrian culture and Hungary. Hungarian educational institutions, to give perhaps one of the most important aspects in the first third of the book, were a close replica of those in Germany and Austria, and it ensured that all these persons spoke fluent German and had a high level of education in various fields. On the other hand, in the first third of the century, Germany seemed to be the place where, at least for the time being, these intellectuals could freely practice their profession and thrive in their chosen fields. This was especially true for post-World War I Weimar Germany. In the first two decades, it was mainly musicians and men of letter that went there, after that it was the scientists’ turn. From Germany then, especially later when Hitler’s rise changed the situation fundamentally, most of these people followed their journey to the United States. This “Berlin Juncture” (a

whole chapter of the book) was even more important during the 1920s, since with the quota laws in the United States after 1921, there were only precious few who could get entry visa to the US, so Germany served even more as a magnet. Hundreds of Hungarians arrived here and a small Hungarian community was established. Count Kuno Klebelsberg, Hungarian minister of religion and education, made an effort to lure back many of those intellectuals in Germany, but to little avail (140–142). The only group that showed real inclination of returning to Hungary was that of the painters, but this phenomenon had more to do with their lack of success in Germany than real homesickness (153–154). However, from 1933 the atmosphere in Germany made it impossible for Jews to stay, and the second phase of this step-immigration started, this time from Germany to the United States.

The second half of *Double Exile* concentrates on the United States. First, it introduces the short history of the two Quota Acts of 1921 and 1924, and their effect on Central European, and more precisely, on Hungarian immigration. Hungary, which contributed about 100,000 immigrants per year before World War I, was now restricted to 5,747 in 1921, then to 473 in 1924, a figure that was equal to 2% of their representation based upon the 1890 US Bureau Census, and even a two-fold increase in 1924 did not alter this situation significantly (181–182). Obviously, the Great Depression did not favor any more lenient sentiment in the US. The high rate of unemployment made everybody abhorred of large masses coming from other countries to take possibly their jobs. Interestingly, however, just when the Nazi persecution of the Jews started in Germany, anti-Semitism rose higher in the United States as well (192–194). Later this movement to restrict immigrants found itself opposed by the nation's need for talented people under oppression in other countries in the world. An interesting feature of the book is the picture of New York in the turbulent years of the 1930s in terms of the attitude toward the high number of immigrants. Since New York was almost exclusively the place immigrants arrived in, it is important to understand how the city's population related to them. Here, the anti-foreignism met anti-Semitism and created a rather hostile atmosphere for the many thousands of immigrants arriving in the US (204–209).

The majority of immigrants coming from Hungary turned out to be Jews, thus adding a special flavor to Hungarian immigration. Although they had not problem in Germany on account of their near-native knowledge of German, in the United States they had to face the difficulty

of having to learn another language at middle age. Among the so-called new Hungarian immigrants the lack of the ability to learn adequate English was conspicuous as contemporaries such as Ferenc Molnár or Géza Zsoldos noted (238–240). Also, Hungary's situation was understandably affected by the country's satellite status to Germany, thus immigration basically came to a standstill after November 1940. Again, next to wealth, what helped a Hungarian to get the right to immigrate to the US was "the combination of financial stability, good character, young age, and some class." (199)

In the last two chapters we learn individual stories of famous Hungarian-born scientists. These short biographies are unique in the sense that they concentrate on the process of the men's journey to the United States and their careers are investigated in light of that fact. Through the prism of their immigrating to the United States, the reader becomes familiar of the underlying process of how one could manage to travel from troubled Europe to the US after 1933. Therefore, the five chosen men's story strengthens the overall thesis of the book: well-educated and thriving Hungarian scientists, who were considered useful for American purposes in the academic and scientific field, could make it to the promised-land and avoided the fate of hundred of thousands of Jews in Europe.

The physicist Leo Szilárd (243–263), who left Hungary in late 1919 partly because of the reigning White Terror, settled in Berlin first. Here he had quite a career in his chosen field where he worked with, among others, Albert Einstein. After the Nazi victory in Germany he moved to Vienna in 1933. He described the situation in Germany as "nothing crazier has happened in human history since the days of the French Terror." (262) He was also in active, similarly to John von Neumann and Theodore von Kármán, to help organize relief efforts for other scientists like him to get the possibility to move to the United States. Michael Polanyi (264–269) left Germany, after much hesitation, for Great Britain in 1932. Getting into the United States, however, was not easy in the 1930s. On the one hand, high rate of unemployment made many Americans reluctant to see waves of foreigners come and take the jobs, on the other hand, anti-foreignism and anti-Semitism went hand in hand for many Americans (279–286). Although there were many organizations for relief purposes, this fact alone could not help most of the Hungarians who wanted to immigrate to the United States. Securing visa was almost impossible.

The Rockefeller Foundation was the largest relief organization during the discussed period, which by the end of the War, aided 295 scholars and spent \$1,410,000 on relief (330). Despite other organizations adding to these figures, such as the New School for Social Research or the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, this was obviously a low figure in light of the great number of scientists that would have needed help in relocation from Nazi Germany or its vassal countries such as Hungary.

The closing chapter is uncovering a so far untouched subject: the Jewish-Hungarian immigrants as essential contributors to the US war effort against Nazi Germany. As the author sums it up: "The Jewish-Hungarian group was of paramount importance for the U.S. in the War years: they fought against Hitler enthusiastically, embraced American values and became devoted Americans in this effort." (351) So, in the end, when these people had found their new home after so much trouble, they used their talent against the very countries they had lived earlier in, that is, Hungary and most of all Germany. The traditional American pragmatism met with Hungarian brains and the result was a high level of "problem solving," a key term for Frank. One of the emblematic figures in this field was George Pólya (353–364), while another was Theodore von Kármán (367–382). The latter's interest and knowledge in aeronautical engineering and aerodynamic research was very welcome in the United States, where these fields got in the limelight with the coming and then the raging of the war, and later in the Cold War period as well. He was also one of the few who returned to Germany after the war to help reorganize German science there, all this under the auspices of the US government, which had a great stake in rebuilding Germany for political reasons. Perhaps the most well-known name is that of John von Neumann (382–400), who achieved so much in the pioneering age of computer science, which again, in a larger measure, was attributed first to the war efforts, then the Cold War situation. Leo Szilárd was another Hungarian born scientist, who emigrated to the United States after a Berlin, then a Great Britain stop, and just like von Neumann, he also took part in the Manhattan Project to build the first atomic bomb (400–429). Indeed, it was a joint Hungarian effort to convince Albert Einstein to sign the paper that would persuade Franklin Roosevelt about the need of building the devastating new weapon. Later Szilárd turned against the usage of the bomb, and after the war he was a fierce advocate of trying to secure the control of atomic energy in civilian hands instead that of the government.

To simplify the issue, American financial means and a history of pragmatism was infused with the best brains, not only from Hungary, but indeed from all over Europe. Hungary seems to stand out if one breaks down the numbers proportionally. The late nineteenth-century innovations in the Hungarian educational system were one of the reasons why these Jewish-Hungarian young men could possess the basics of their immense knowledge that ensured that they would ultimately survive and escape the institutionalized and deadly anti-Semitism in Europe. Naturally, the surrounding economic, social, political, and cultural factors were just as important. One of the highest acknowledgments of these people in their new home country came on Kármán's 80th birthday, when Senator Henry M. Jackson praised their effort in building up the modern science of the United States: "The vigor of science in the United States today is due in large part to the contributions of brilliant and dedicated men who came to our shores from Europe [...] It is an interesting bit of history that five of the greatest of these men should have been born, and spent their childhood, in the same district of one city, Budapest, Hungary. I am, of course, thinking of Dr. Leo Szilard, Dr. John von Neumann, Dr. Edward Teller, Dr. Eugene Wigner, and finally, Dr. Theodore von Karman." (379) By the same token, the book's group biography presents Hungary's gradual loss of some of its most talented people (many of which lived well over the average life span) while first Germany and Western Europe, then the United States gaining the special and very useful qualities of these scientists. This was also one of the intentions of the author (433). In the same vein, the book is a warning that today Hungary is facing a similar situation as far as its talented few are concerned. They are often employed outside Hungary, most typically in the United States, and rarely do they return to their native country, adding to the historical continuum of loss of talent.

Double Exile is an interdisciplinary undertaking in the sense that it deals not only with history per se. Much of its content falls under the heading of cultural, educational, sociological, and ethnic studies. An additional curiosity is the list at the end of the book. It contains a thorough, although confessedly not finalized list of Hungarians who left Hungary through Germany to the United States. The list gives the date of arrival both in Germany and the United States of about 300 hundred notable émigrés who all became successful in their own right. Through the almost fantastic journey of these people, the reader gets a glimpse not into Hungarian political and cultural issues then in being, but also into the larger political questions of the era, namely the attitude of the United

States toward emigration in the 1920s and 1930s and the channeling of intellectual emigration into the American war effort during World War II and the Cold War confrontation with the Soviet Union.